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ABSTRACT

For those who consider themselves teachers, "cultural literacy" is an issue worth pondering. In "Education for Critical Consciousness," Paulo Freire deplores the "banking concept" of education, in which a teacher "pours" knowledge into "passive receptacles," because Freire believes that texts have no single, stable meaning. He defines "Kultur" as a given or traditional knowledge--fixed, immutable, and of unquestioned value. Culture, on the other hand, is always in a state of becoming, being made. In Freire's view, then, the "cultured" person sees oneself as a creative agent, and the principle that everyone can be a culture-maker and that culture is not confined to concert halls and museums can be extended to any student. Culture in Freire's sense would not exclude elements of Kultur from the classroom, but would promote a creative, dialectical movement that would incorporate them, both old and new, in a dynamic process of becoming. Freire argues that cultural literacy can only be achieved through "problem-posing education," consisting of acts of cognition, not transferrals of information. The students, in dialogue with the teacher, must create their own knowledge, a goal that they cannot reach if they deal only with Kultur. A language arts lesson that uses the "masters" as examples of what might be accomplished and student texts as paradigms of the failure to reach the ideal, will only alienate learners. But the danger in problem-posing education is obvious: all absolute certainty vanishes, except the faith that new insight, greater understanding lies just beyond the next question. As a humane revolutionary, Freire provides reasons to support "cultural" literacy without succumbing to Kultur. (Six references are included.) (NKA)

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Literacy: Kultur and Culture

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To acquire literacy is more than
to psychologically and mechanically
dominate reading and writing techniques.
It is to dominate these techniques in
terms of consciousness; to understand
what one reads and to write what one
understands; it is to communicate
graphically. Acquiring literacy does not
involve memorizing sentences, words, or
syllables--lifeless objects unconnected
to an existential universe--but rather an
attitude of creation and re-creation, a
self-transformation producing a stance of
intervention in one's context.

--Paulo Freire, Education for
Critical Consciousness (trans.
Myra Bergman Ramos)

I need not argue for the self-evident proposition that
"cultural literacy" is a major professional and political
concern, an issue worth pondering, for the likes of you and me,
that is, for folks who consider themselves teachers, and
especially for teachers in the grades, who have such power to
determine what both "culture" and "literacy" will be for their
students.

"Cultural literacy"--but what could literacy be if not
"cultural"? Literacy is radically scenic, of a time, a place, a
society. We read with our minds, not our eyes. We read for
meaning, for understanding, not for pronunciations. Finding a
book on higher mathematics difficult to read, we take a course in

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math, but don't go to the reading clinic to develop our "skills."

Education for Critical Consciousness, by Paulo Freire, is one of the central statements regarding education in general and literacy in particular. Even the term "critical consciousness" is resonant, suggesting as it does that education should give people the ability to analyze and evaluate their society and their role in that society and thus take charge of their own destinies.

Freire, with good teachers at all levels from kindergarten through graduate school, deplores the "banking concept" of education, in which a teacher pours knowledge into the passive receptacles before him. As Freire says, "Communication gives way to communiqués by the teacher, who makes deposits which the students meekly receive, memorize, and repeat." (Education for Critical Consciousness, 75) It is not revolutionary to posit that learning must be active, not passive, and that teacher and student must interact, carrying on a dialogue that replaces the lecture-monologue of the banking model of education. However, in the context of Freire's work, this good-natured, sensible position on learning becomes something less familiar and more revolutionary.

Specifically, Freire first leads us to a critical understanding of the difference between what I will call Kultur and a redefined "culture." Next, he plunges us into the abyss of indeterminacy, the belief that texts have no single, stable meaning. Both of these moves have profound implications for the schools.

Kultur and culture, then.

Kultur is a given, stable, immutable, and of unquestioned value. It is what institutions "pass on" from generation to generation, in the form of canons, collections, and societal norms. Manifestations of Kultur are Julius Caesar in the eleventh-grade literature anthology, and the literature anthology itself; the Getty Museum in Malibu; the Lincoln Center for the performing arts. These are "given," donated, conveyed. They are pre-existent and for all practical purposes eternal. They also, of course, belong to certain classes in society.

Culture, on the other hand, is always becoming, being made. In Freire's view, the cultured person is she who sees herself as a creative agent, not merely a partaker, a donee. The illiterate, who stood in awe of Kultur, was puzzled by it, afraid of it,

would begin to . . . change . . . his former attitudes, by discovering himself to be a maker of the world of culture, by discovering that he, as well as the literate person, has a creative and re-creative impulse. He would discover that culture is just as much a clay doll made by artists who are his peers as it is the work of a great sculptor, a great painter, a great mystic, or a great philosopher; that culture is the poetry of lettered poets and also the poetry of his own popular songs--that culture is all human creation. ("Education as the Practice of Freedom," Education for Critical Consciousness, 47)

Freire, of course, is talking about Brazilian peasants, but substitute "fifth-grader," "high school senior," or "college

freshman" for "illiterate," and the principle is extended--the principle that everyone can be a culture-maker and that culture is not confined to tomes, monuments, concert halls, and museums.

The point, however, is to preserve Kultur by gaining for it the allegiance of critically conscious beings who envision themselves as participants in the same spheres of action as the "masters." Perhaps the most maligned work of Kultur is that wonderful tale Silas Marner, long the staple of high school English courses. Culture, in Freire's sense, is not a revolution that would abolish this monument, but a creative, dialectical movement that would incorporate it, with other diverse works both old and new, in a dynamic process of becoming.

The term "cultural literacy" is most important at this moment. As E. D. Hirsch, Jr., explains,

. . . cultural literacy is that knowledge that enables a writer or reader to know what other writers and readers know within the literate culture. Thus it is not only a knowledge of convention and vocabularies but is also a knowledge that this information is widely shared by others. Moreover, since this shared culture is changing at its edges, the content of cultural literacy is also changing. New things become part of it and old things drop away--even while the more permanent central core remains. (146)

I think that Hirsch's argument is unexceptionable. We know that we read with our minds, not our eyes; we know also that writers achieve their purposes through the means of the knowledge that they share with their readers. Without cultural literacy, there would be no reading or writing, unless, of course, we would take

information retrieval to be the sole function of literacy.

The question is not whether we should work toward cultural literacy, for literacy is cultural, but how we should achieve it.

Freire would argue that we can achieve cultural literacy only through what he calls "problem-posing education," which consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information. It is a learning situation in which the cognizable object (far from being the end of the cognitive act) intermediates the cognitive actors--teacher on the one hand and students on the other. Accordingly, the practice of problem-posing education entails at the outset that the teacher-student contradiction be resolved. Dialogical relations--indispensable to the capacity of cognitive actors to cooperate in perceiving the same cognizable object--are otherwise impossible. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 67)

Which is not to say that the teacher does not "know" more--about Silas Marner and George Eliot--than the students, but that the students, in dialogue with the teacher, must create their own knowledge, a goal that they cannot reach if they deal only with Kultur, which is given to them, and not with culture, which they are creating and which includes their own works.

For example: a language arts lesson that uses the "masters" as examples of what might be accomplished and student texts as paradigms of the failure to reach the ideal of Kultur will only alienate the learners. A school library that promulgates only Kultur will be equally alienating. A basic

reading class that relies only on texts foreign to the students' cultures is bound to fail.

Culture, then, has no hard-and-fast parameters, but is continually created by creators who reinterpret what is and was and who contribute their own works to the immediate future. Thus, the problem of cultural literacy is not so much one of compiling lists of works, as demonstrating through a dialogic and loving pedagogy that every human is part of the culture-making process. "Problem-posing education affirms men as beings in the process of becoming--as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality." (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 72)

The danger in problem-posing education is obvious: all absolute certainty vanishes, except the faith that new insight, greater understanding lies just beyond the next question. As Freire says,

To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 76)

The world we live in gains meaning only when we interpret it, and our interpretations can be widely various. Freire gives this wonderful example:

In Santiago . . . a group of tenement residents discussed a scene showing a drunken man walking on the street and three young men conversing on the corner. The group participants commented that "the only one there who is productive and

useful to his country is the souse who is returning home after working all day for low wages and who is worried about his family because he can't take care of their needs. He is the only worker. He is a decent worker and souse like us. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 111)

Education must begin with society and the environment as they exist because meaning comes from the situation and is inseparable from it.

. . . neither language nor thought can exist without a structure to which they refer. In order to communicate effectively, educator and politician must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed 85-86)

One lives in a "thematic universe," a web of interlocking concerns, and it is these "generative themes" that form the basis for Freire's pedagogical method, which relies not so much on technic (e.g., phonics, drills, reading "attack skills") as what might be called rhetoric (that is, the relationship of words to the thematic universe in which the subjects live), and of the two, rhetoric is by far the more important. Technic makes words, but rhetoric makes meanings. In brief, here is Freire's method of teaching reading to adult illiterates:

The literacy teacher begins with a generative word, such as favela (slum) and breaks it into syllables: fa-ve-la. These syllables in turn generate phonemic groups: fa-fe-fi-fo-fu, va-ye . . . and so on. However, the word

favela is not presented visually until, as Freire says, the group "discusses the problems of housing, food, clothing, health, and education in a slum . . . and further perceives the slum as a problem situation. . . ." (Education for Critical Consciousness, 82) Other generative words are presented, and ultimately the group is using its newly acquired knowledge of phonemic combinations to read and then write other words. (Winterowd, 310)

As opposed to the banking concept of education, underlying which are the consoling certainties of accepted knowledge and tradition and the belief that behind every situation there is a meaning, problem-posing education sucks us into the vortex of indeterminacy, where knowledge is always constructed and "truth" ever evolves through the "eternal dialogue between man and man, between man and his Creator. It is this dialogue which makes of man an historical being." (Education for Critical Consciousness, 17-18)

In problem-posing education,
The students--no longer docile listeners--are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. The teacher presents the material to the students for their consideration, and he re-considers his earlier considerations as the students express their own. The role of the problem-posing educator is to create, together with the students, the conditions under which knowledge at the level of doxa is superseded by true knowledge at the level of the logos. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, 68)

A humane and loving revolutionary, Freire gives us reason

to support cultural literacy without succumbing to Kultur. It is particularly satisfying to discover such a powerful ally and equally satisfying to realize that he and we are completely within a great tradition that began with the Greeks and Romans and gained one of its most lucid and succinct expressions in Montaigne's "Of the Education of Children":

Our tutors never stop bawling into our ears, as though they were pouring water into a funnel; and our task is only to repeat what has been told us. I should like the tutor to correct this practice, and right from the start, according to the capacity of the mind he has in hand, to begin putting it through its paces, making it taste things, choose them, and discern them by itself; sometimes clearing the way for him, sometimes letting him clear his own way. I don't want him to think and talk alone. I want him to listen to his pupil speaking in his turn. Socrates, and later Arcesilaus, first had their disciples speak, and then they spoke to them. The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn [Cicero].

(12)

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